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ABSTRACT

This report describes the New Song Academy, led by New Song Urban Ministries (NSUM), which serves preK-8 children in Baltimore, Maryland, and promotes quality education for urban students through partnerships with families and the community. It operates year-round in six 6-week sessions. Despite the often chaotic nature of children's lives outside of school, the Academy averages a daily attendance rate of 98 percent. Children receive the intellectual, social, and physical basis they need to become community leaders. The school uses a home-schooling curriculum from Calvert School, which focuses on the fundamentals of language arts, and a school design developed by Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound, which emphasizes hands-on learning and intimate, caring, interpersonal relationships. Through partnerships with outside organizations, the school brings the outside world and its resources into the community while encouraging linkages in the other direction. This report includes: (1) "A Snapshot of New Song Academy" (curricula, instruction, activities, and staffing); (2) "A History of New Song Academy and New Song Urban Ministries" (NSUM mission, core components, governance, and resources); (3) "New Song Academy's Accomplishments and Themes"; and (4) "Lessons from New Song Urban Ministries and New Song Academy." (SM)

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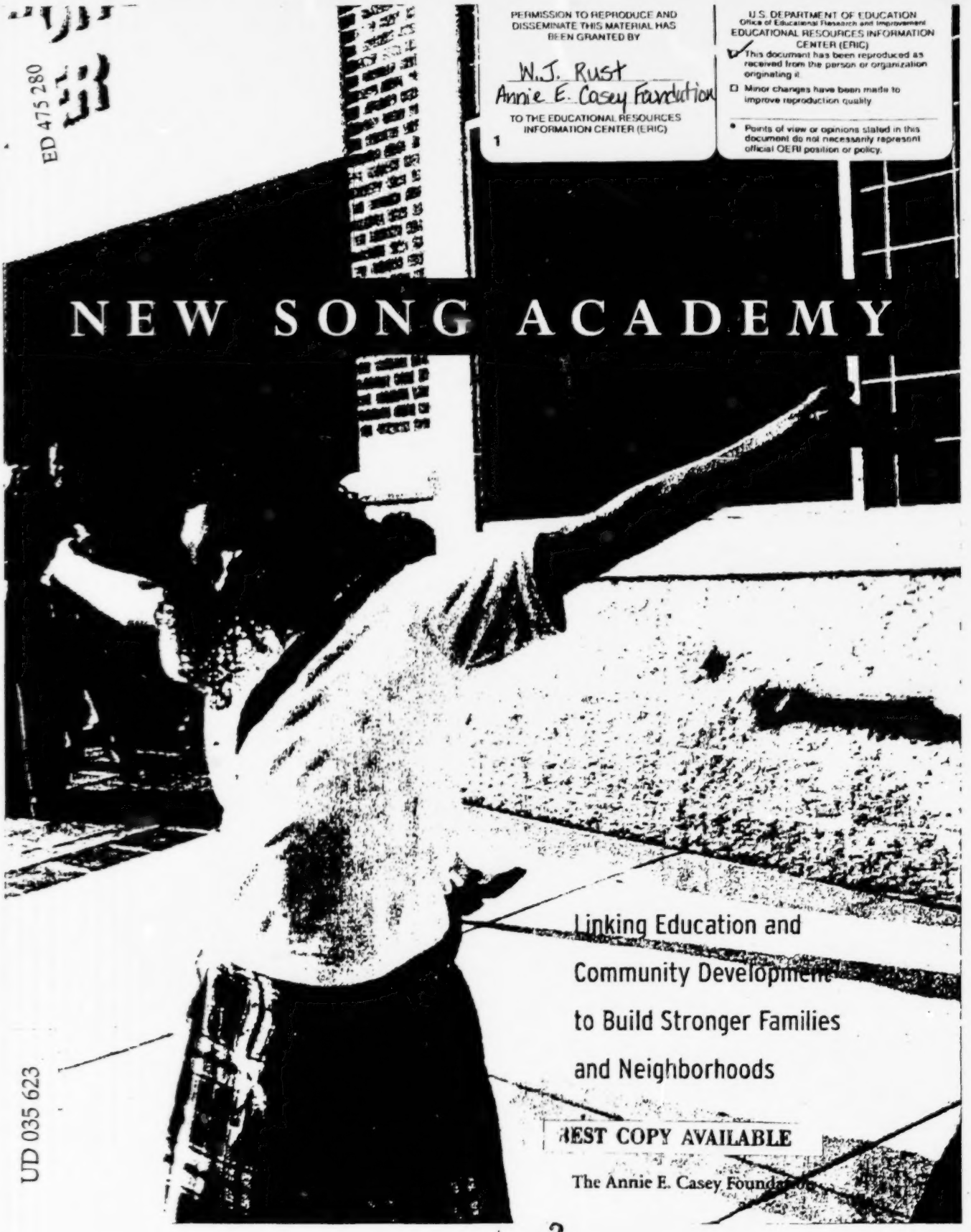

NEW SONG ACADEMY

Linking Education and Community Development to Build Stronger Families and Neighborhoods

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation

UD 035 623

Prepared for the Annie E. Casey Foundation and New Song Academy
By Prudence Brown and Leila Fiester

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. It was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, one of the founders of United Parcel Service, and his siblings, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.

Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago is a policy research center dedicated to bringing sound information, rigorous analyses, innovative ideas, and an independent, multidisciplinary perspective to bear on improving the well-being of children and of the families and communities in which they live. Chapin Hall's research agenda currently includes the following major areas: children's services, covering the problems that threaten children and the services designed to address them; primary supports for child and youth development, concerning the resources and activities in communities that enhance the development and well-being of all children; and community building, focusing on the development, documentation, and evaluation of community-building initiatives designed to strengthen communities as important environments for children and families.

FOREWORD

Bruno V. Manno
Senior Associate for System and Service Reform
Manager of Education Investments
The Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has long admired New Song Urban Ministries and the vital role it plays in helping Sandtown-Winchester residents construct a brighter future for themselves. New Song's overarching values—resident leadership that focuses on families, broad partnerships that connect families to community institutions, and a relentless drive to achieve measurable results—resonate well with the Foundation. We have a long-standing commitment to building strong families and nurturing neighborhoods through social networks, responsive services and supports, and economic opportunities. In particular, New Song Academy has modeled many of the qualities of charter and community schools that form a key element of Casey's education investments, including autonomous operations, challenging content, small size, close ties to families, collaboration with teachers and students, and a focus on results.

The Casey Foundation began its support for New Song Academy in 1994–95 with a grant to develop a preschool curriculum that helped parents interact with their young children and promote language development. Later, the Foundation paid for an evaluation of the middle-school program and provided a rationale for increased public funding. Between 1997 and 2002, Casey made 10 grants (totaling more than $333,000) to various components of New Song Urban Ministries, including a $125,000 grant to the school to support family and community outreach, implementation of the Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound curriculum, afterschool services, and professional development for school staff.

Over the course of those investments, we have watched New Song have a significant impact on the lives of Sandtown children and families. We have seen it begin to influence ideas, policies, and systems in positive ways. And we believe New Song, including the Academy, has the power to further leverage its present funding of approximately $5 million into additional support for good ideas and practices.

We see this report as another way to support New Song's efforts and to provoke wider discussion about the themes of education reform and community revitalization that New Song embodies. As the authors conclude, New Song's future rests in part with the residents of Sandtown. But on a larger scale, it lies with all of us and our ability as individuals and institutions to tirelessly strive for better schools, more responsive systems and supports, and healthier families—just as the neighborhood-based creators and supporters of New Song Academy have done.

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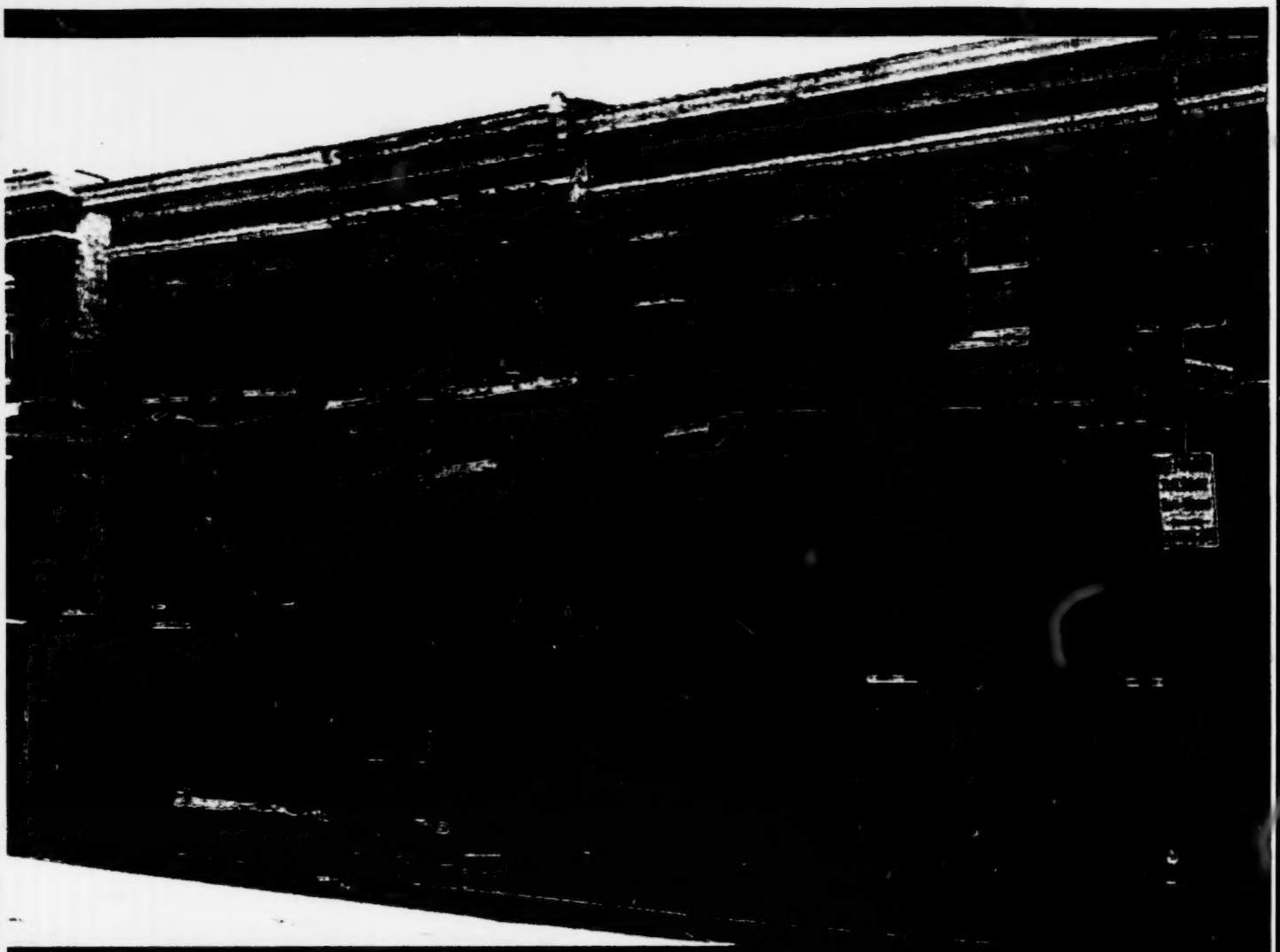

INTRODUCTION

Every large city has a place like the Sandtown-Winchester community of West Baltimore, a 72-block area that struggles with concentrated, enduring poverty. Once a thriving African-American community, Sandtown lost about half of its population in the 1970s and 1980s. By 1990, almost one-fourth of Sandtown's row houses stood vacant. Today, the median income in Sandtown is about $15,000. Crime and violence, drug use, unemployment, substandard housing, ineffective schools, and a lack of physical and economic resources still undermine residents' hopes and futures. About half of all children between the ages of 10 and 17 have been arrested for drug-related offenses; rates of substantiated child abuse and lead poisoning are among the highest in the city and further threaten the healthy development of Sandtown children.

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But a 15-block pocket of this community also has something that sets it apart: a comprehensive mission, led by an organization known as New Song Urban Ministries (NSUM), that has engaged many of the area's 4,000 residents to rebuild neighborhood infrastructure, renovate and build homes, improve health, expand education and employment opportunities, and cultivate a rich and empowering sense of community.[1] (An organizational chart for NSUM appears on page 4.)

A cornerstone of NSUM's revitalization effort is New Song Academy (NSA). Part of a Community Learning Center that started with a cooperative preschool and an afterschool program, the Academy serves students in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade and also helps parents and other community adults pursue education.

The school's achievements, and the challenges it continues to face, offer useful lessons about the factors that support or undermine education in poor but revitalizing communities. This report documents those lessons and their implications. It is intended as a resource for school and district leaders considering similar enterprises and for people with an interest in such policy issues as the role of charter and charter-like schools (see box at right) in contemporary public education, or the links between education and community development.

The ideas presented here come from interviews with New Song Academy administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and students; leaders of other NSUM components; and representatives of the Baltimore City Public Schools, philanthropies, businesses, and financial institutions that support New Song. The authors also visited the school several times and reviewed written materials and student data.

The following themes emerged from those activities:

- **New Song Academy's history and trajectory are linked inextricably to New Song Urban Ministries and to neighborhood context.** NSUM and its educational component evolve in response to needs and goals expressed over time by the community, and that organic development process is an important part of the school's story. Moreover, the interrelationships between New Song Academy and the other NSUM components are a crucial factor in each of their successes.

[1] Many funders have invested in components of New Song Urban Ministries, as discussed later in this report. Among them, the Enterprise Foundation has been an early and devoted investor in the entire Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood. In NSUM's target area, Enterprise supported New Song Academy with a loan and grant for a day-care facility, and it provided construction loans, grants, and technical assistance to Sandtown Habitat for Humanity.

New Song Academy and the Baltimore New Schools Initiative

NSA is one of 10 schools in Baltimore's New Schools Initiative, which began in 1996 as an effort to help schools better serve students with disabilities. The initiative soon expanded to address the academic achievement of all children and to give communities more control over their own educational needs.

Participating schools are similar to *charter and community schools*—institutions that are part of the public school system but smaller and more personal, more autonomous in their operations, close to families, collaborative in their approach to teachers and students, and often focused around a common core of challenging subjects. They also are often schools of choice for families and teachers.

Baltimore's New Schools have flexibility to select non-standard curricula and staff and to address students' needs individually. The flexibility provided by the New Schools Initiative gives NSA crucial freedom to experiment with "what works." The schools administer the district's mandatory standardized tests, however, and their continued funding hinges on students' ability to meet the district's standards for academic performance.

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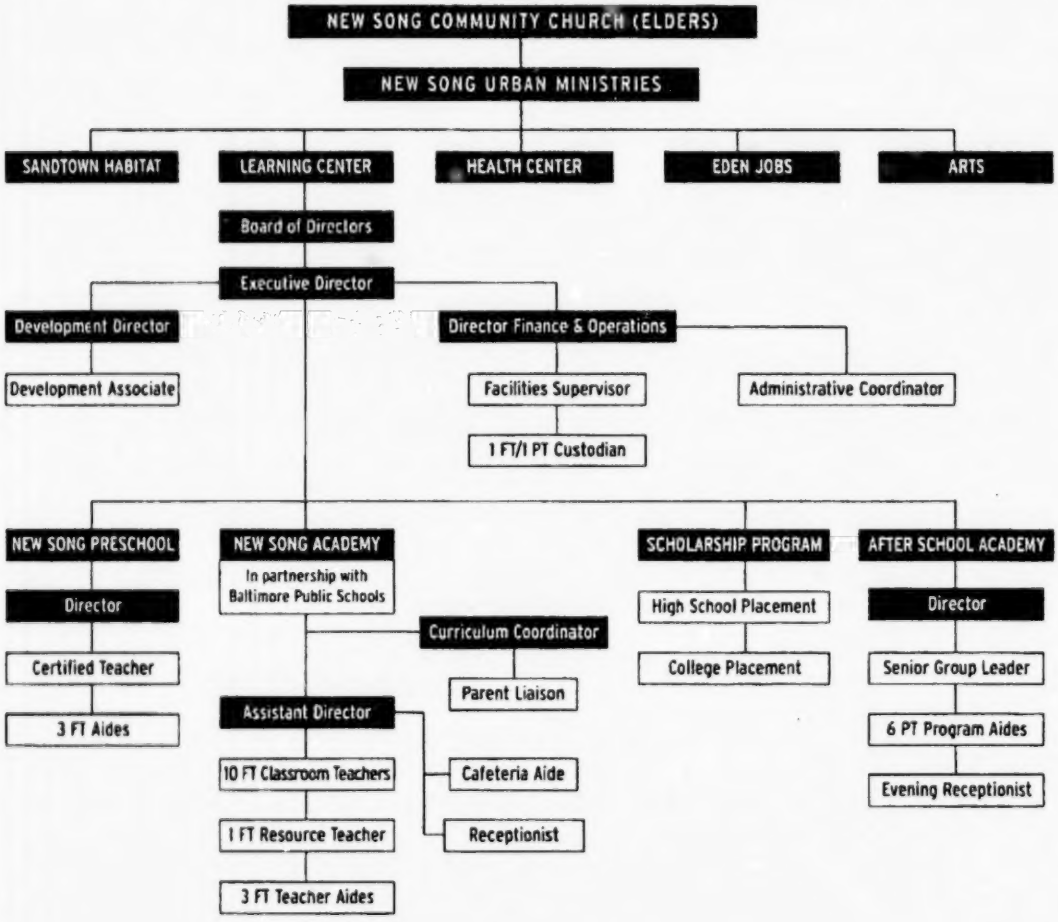
- **Partnership among the school, residents, and an array of organizations within and outside Sandtown is a vital factor in New Song Academy's success.** It encompasses deep commitments to strengthening and supporting residents as leaders, connecting Sandtown to resources and opportunities outside its boundaries, and introducing new resources into the community.
- **The passion, faith, and commitment of NSA's founders have propelled the school to important initial achievements, but sustainability remains a concern.** Less than a decade old, NSA strives to fulfill its broad community development mission and develop leaders for the future while maintaining support from the public school system and supplementing that assistance with other investments.

Chapter One provides a snapshot of New Song Academy's goals and structure. Chapter Two explains how and why the school was created, including a brief history of the overarching NSUM mission and components. Chapter Three outlines New Song Academy's accomplishments and underlying themes. Chapter Four explores the lessons from New Song Urban Ministries that are the key to understanding what is special about New Song Academy. The report concludes with observations about New Song's impact, influence, leverage, and continuing challenges.



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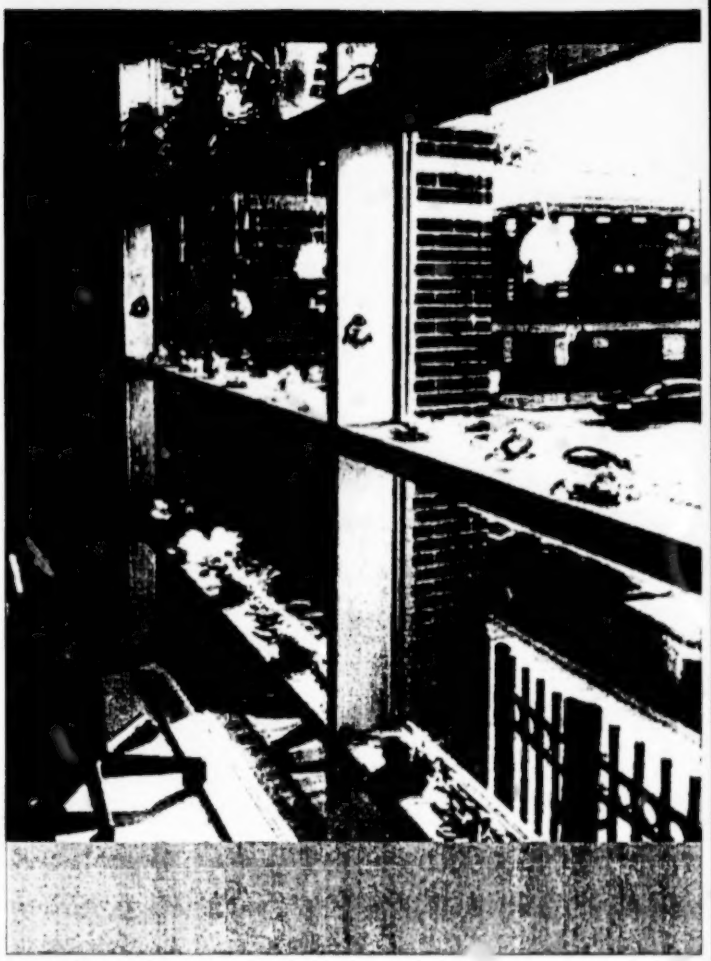


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Prudence Brown is a research fellow at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, where she has focused on the documentation and evaluation of community change initiatives, new approaches to learning from and providing assistance to these initiatives, and the role of philanthropy in community change. Prior to joining Chapin Hall, she served as deputy director of the Urban Poverty Program at the Ford Foundation.

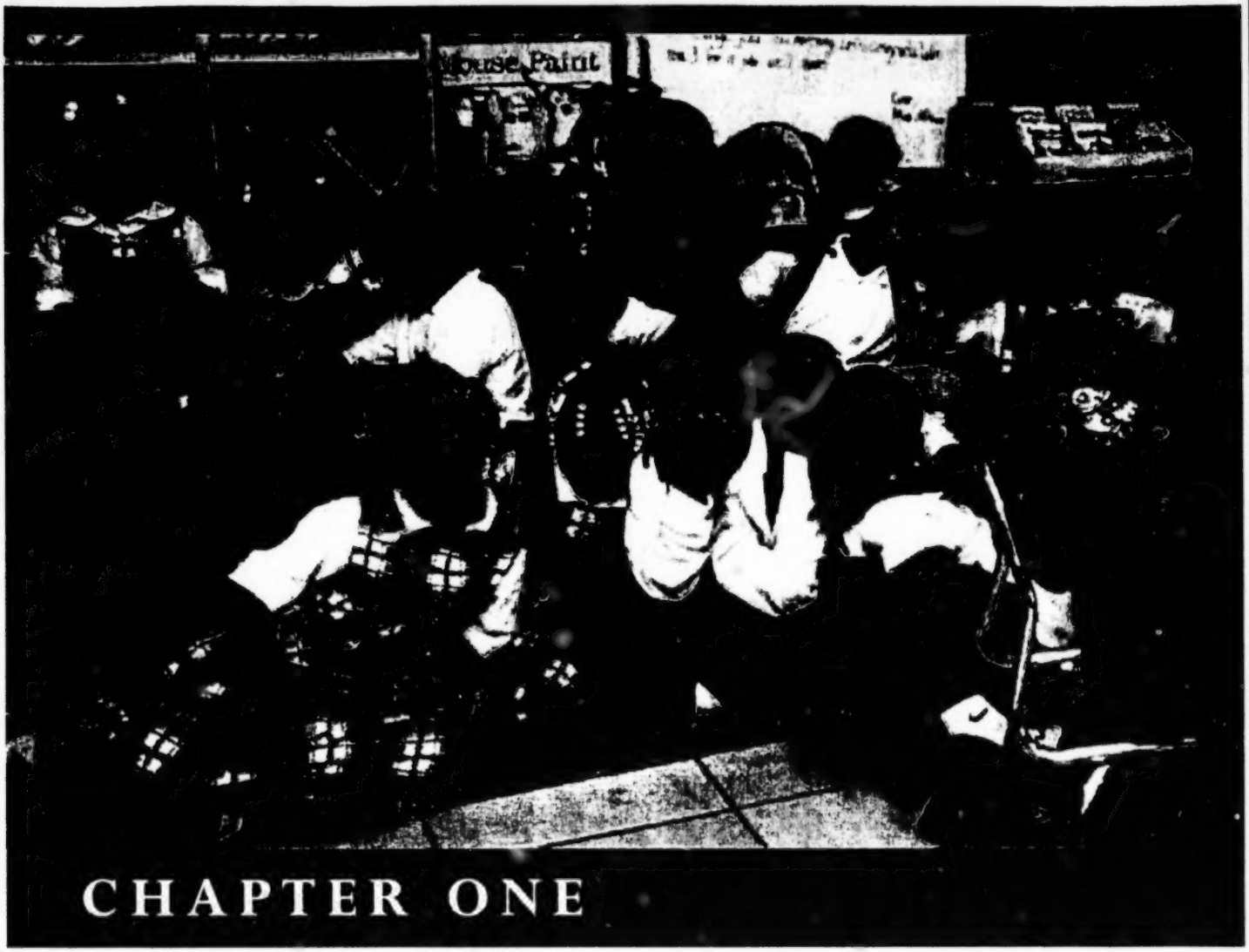
Leila Fiester is an independent writer and editor, based in western Maryland, who specializes in issues, programs, and policies that affect children and communities. For the Casey Foundation, she creates and manages products that describe major areas of investment, explain context and impact, capture the story behind evolving strategies, and distill lessons learned. She previously served as a senior research associate at Policy Studies Associates and as a reporter for *The Washington Post*.

AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We wish to express our deep appreciation to the many people who contributed to this report. Most importantly, the people of Sandtown generously shared their life stories and perspectives, which helped us begin to appreciate the pain and the joy of living in Sandtown. As we grew to understand how deeply embedded New Song Academy and the other programs of New Song Urban Ministries are in the community, we saw how the changes people make in their own lives influence the changes they are able to make in their community. We came away touched by the power of New Song's approach and humbled by the challenge of trying to convey it in this report.

Susan and Allan Tibbels are extraordinary individuals. But as they were so quick to show us, they are surrounded by many other extraordinary people who make the school work so well, who build the Habitat houses, who help people find jobs, and so forth. We thank them all for their help.

We are also grateful to Bruno Manno of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, who envisioned this report, supported its development, and shared our enthusiasm for helping New Song Academy tell its own story. Connie Dykstra provided invaluable assistance as coordinator of the Foundation's publications department. Finally, the report benefited greatly from the design and production talents of Beth Desnick, Thea Nelson, and Bill Raaum of Thebe Street Works in Minneapolis and from Paul Stetzer's photographs, which capture the flavor of life in Sandtown and New Song's work.



CHAPTER ONE

A Snapshot of New Song Academy

New Song Academy, which serves children in pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, is a program of New Song Community Learning Center, which also encompasses a preschool program, afterschool learning and recreational activities, a scholarship program for Academy graduates who attend private high school, and educational programs for Sandtown parents. As a core component of New Song Urban Ministries, the Learning Center seeks to revitalize the neighborhood so that residents are healthy, self-sufficient, and able to lead their community to a better future. Its mission, as revised in 2002, is "to develop and empower leaders from the Sandtown-Winchester community by providing year-round educational opportunities for children and youth and their families."

The fact that the Community Learning Center's mission does not directly mention "school" is significant. For New Song Urban Ministries, the school is a vehicle for

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Overcoming Sandtown's Odds

The experiences of Janelle, a Sandtown resident, typify the hurdles faced by many New Song Academy students. A self-described "problem child," Janelle was raised in an overcrowded, drug-abusing household. Much of her youth involved street life and violence, and she landed in the juvenile justice system. Nonetheless, Janelle managed to focus herself and graduate from high school.

When Janelle was 15, she became the full-time caretaker of her three-year-old sister, Hershey. Determined to give her sister the stability and opportunities she had lacked, Janelle was receptive to the opportunities offered by New Song.

First, she enrolled Hershey in New Song's afterschool program and began attending parent meetings at the school. Then, encouraged by school staff, Janelle applied for and obtained a home developed by Sandtown Habitat. Now 11 years old, Hershey attends New Song Academy, sings in the choir, and plays on the basketball team. Janelle, 24, works for EDEN Jobs as coordinator of the Individual Development Account (IDA) program. New Song Academy's extended school day, and EDEN's flexible work plan, have enabled Janelle to juggle her work and family responsibilities while also taking a full load of college courses.

accomplishing the mission, not an end in itself. The statement about families also is important, because it promotes the idea that effective child development requires parents to actively participate in education—their own, as well as that of their children.

New Song Academy is the Community Learning Center's main vehicle for promoting education goals. The school, located in the Center's main building, serves 120 students. Citing evidence that children learn best when classes are small, New Song Academy limits enrollment despite a waiting list of more than 200 applicants. The per-pupil cost is about $10,000, of which about 60 percent comes from the school district.

New Song Academy operates year-round in six six-week sessions. The continuous schedule eliminates summer learning losses but still gives the children breaks from their intensive engagement at school. Additional learning opportunities come from the school's extended day, which begins with breakfast at 8 a.m. and ends at 5 p.m. Afterschool activities and clubs take place at the Community Learning Center from 5 to 8 p.m., and most students are involved in several activities.

Despite the often chaotic nature of children's lives outside school, the Academy averages a daily attendance rate of 98 percent, one of the highest rates in the city (especially for middle-school students). Since the Academy became a public school in 1997, only four students have transferred out voluntarily.

New Song Academy's $5 million facility was built in 2001 in response to the community's need and desire for safe public space. The 30,000-square-foot New Song Center now serves as a community center—hosting weddings, receptions, college placement seminars, financial literacy workshops, concerts, and corporate lunches—and a school. It houses 10 classrooms, a large multi-purpose room, a rooftop greenhouse for science lessons, dining facilities, and administrative offices. The building is both impressive and welcoming. It conveys a sense of order and safety that is especially important to Sandtown's children, most of whom have seen someone killed or lost a family member to violence. The school's visual appeal also sets an important context for the curricula, activities, and staffing configurations described below. As a Sandtown resident notes, "'Everything about New Song communicates new hope and growth . . . . [It] is an important part of our philosophy to minister to the whole person.'"[2]

Approximately half of the Board members of New Song Community Learning Center are community residents, and the rest are outside partners.

[2] Cited in Perkins, J. (1995). *Resurrecting Hope*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books.

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"School structures . . . will stand or fall based upon the quality of relationships between staff, parents, and students. At New Song, visitors comment that they can feel love and compassion in the atmosphere the moment they set foot in our door."

—Susan Tibbels, Director of the Community Learning Center
Writing in *The Web*, November 2001

CURRICULA, INSTRUCTION, AND ACTIVITIES

New Song Academy aims to give children the intellectual, social, and physical basis they need to become community leaders. To accomplish that goal, the school relies on a curriculum from the Calvert School, a private school in Baltimore whose home-schooling curriculum is used internationally, and a school design developed by Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound. Consultants from each source observe and support implementation, and staff from the Calvert School use New Song Academy as a model for implementing their curriculum in a public school.

The Calvert curriculum emphasizes the fundamentals of language arts, including literature, composition, vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. Students are required to revise their work until it is perfect. Administrators of New Song Academy say that Calvert's philosophy of excellence helps students develop a strong work ethic that will benefit them throughout their lives.

The Calvert curriculum gets mixed reviews from school staff and parents, however. Some teachers believe it provides valuable structure, and the parent of a second-year NSA student said she liked the emphasis on mastery at each level. Other teachers criticize Calvert as "too traditional" and "needing revamping."

Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound is a school design that includes coursework, teacher training, and instruction. Learning occurs as children explore long-running, multidisciplinary "expeditions"—usually intellectual journeys, rather than physical ones, although fieldwork is an integral component—on such topics as the civil rights movement and community building. Teachers design the expeditions around state and district education standards. The school design also involves flexible grouping, so students stay with the same teacher(s) for at least two years; same-gender classrooms, beginning in fifth grade; team planning among teachers; and the inclusion of parents and community members as visiting experts.

FACTS AT A GLANCE (2002-03)	NEW SONG ACADEMY	BALTIMORE PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Enrollment	120	94,032
Ethnic distribution (rounded)		
African American	100%	88%
White	0%	10%
Hispanic	0%	1%
Asian	0%	Less than 1%
Native American	0%	Less than 1%
Eligible for free/reduced-price meals	93%	66%

Expeditionary Learning is organized around 10 design principles that correlate closely with New Song Urban Ministries' values. These include commitments to shared responsibility for learning, diversity and inclusivity, and community service and compassion.

Almost all New Song teachers, parents, and students praise the hands-on nature of the Expeditionary Learning model. "It exposes kids to the world around them and gives them vocabulary that matches that exposure," explained first- and second-grade teacher Allison Schweigman. "You can see, touch, and feel things, but you can't just refer to them as it/this/that. If you don't have the vocabulary, your reading skills die and you don't connect words on a page to anything real."

Through wide-ranging partnerships with organizations and resources outside Sandtown, New Song also aims to bring the outside world and its resources into the community while encouraging linkages in the other direction. Some of these opportunities involve traditional enrichment activities, such as dancing and violin classes, basketball teams, children's choir, mentoring, and tutoring. Others involve leadership development, such as Best Friends, a national drug, alcohol, and pregnancy prevention program for girls that provides educational, fitness, and community service activities; and Valiant Young Warriors, a program for boys designed to build leadership skills and promote constructive activities. Examples of other partnerships include:

- **An economics education and investment program** for sixth- through eighth-graders, sponsored by The Rouse Company and T. Rowe Price. The two companies invest $25,000 in the stock market on behalf of each incoming sixth-grade class. Volunteers visit weekly to help students acquire the skills needed to manage their portfolio. At the completion of high school, the stocks will be sold, the capital reinvested in the incoming sixth-grade class, and any earnings used for college scholarships.
- **An arts program for middle-school students**, sponsored by Towson University. At Towson, the NSA students participate in arts activities that faculty and student teachers have designed to integrate with NSA curricula. The program offers Sandtown children a range of creative arts experiences and also helps them become comfortable on a college campus.
- **A job readiness club** for NSA graduates, sponsored in collaboration with EDEN Jobs. The club holds workshops to prepare graduates of New Song's middle school for summer and afterschool jobs; it also helps participants identify and pursue job openings.

To further stimulate social ties among residents, some afterschool activities are open to neighborhood children who do not attend New Song Academy, and school leaders hope to create more such opportunities in the future.

STAFFING

New Song Community Learning Center, which includes New Song Academy, has 35 staff members, including 11 teachers, 3 teacher aides, 12 administrative and support staff who play multiple roles, and 9 largely part-time staff associated with the afterschool program. Seventeen of the staff members are neigh-

borhood residents, including many parents of current and former students. New Song Academy's founder, Susan Tibbels, is a neighborhood resident and serves as the Learning Center's director.

Some of NSA's teachers are credentialed professionals who belong to the teachers' union, but many have nontraditional backgrounds and experiences. For example, the fourth-grade teacher is a former social worker and Job Corps counselor with a master's degree in educational administration. The kindergarten teacher is a recent college graduate with a degree in art. The third-grade teacher is a former Teach for America participant. Another teacher worked in a rigidly administered school elsewhere in the county and was ready to quit the profession until she found New Song Academy.

The ability to hire noncredentialed teachers is one key to New Song's success, Susan Tibbels says. Many of these instructors are not invested in a single style of pedagogy, which makes them more willing to try new methods when the first approach doesn't work. Some also share Sandtown children's backgrounds or experiences, which makes it easier for them to establish rapport and to find learning opportunities that match students' interests.

NSA has several other important staffing features that stem from its status as a community school. Such schools typically strive to: help all teachers know each other and every student; develop close ties between teachers and parents, which fosters trust and reinforces the school's expectations at home; and ensure that teachers coordinate what they teach so that students steadily accumulate knowledge and understanding.[3] In keeping with those goals, New Song Academy emphasizes the following aspects of staffing:

An emphasis on intimate, caring, interpersonal relationships
Intimacy and caring—basic principles of the Expeditionary Learning model—are the cornerstones of New Song's school culture. They suggest that "learning is fostered best in small groups where there is trust, sustained caring, and mutual respect among all members of the learning community," as Expeditionary Learning materials state.[4]

Thus NSA makes sure that a caring adult is assigned to monitor the progress of every child. Student-teacher classroom ratios are never more than 15:1. Paid and volunteer staff serve as formal mentors to students, and older students mentor the younger ones. Staff know and call every child and parent by name. When children come to school with sadness and fears—

[3]Excerpted from "Building More Effective Community Schools," (no date). Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.
[4]See the Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound website at www.elob.org, 2002.

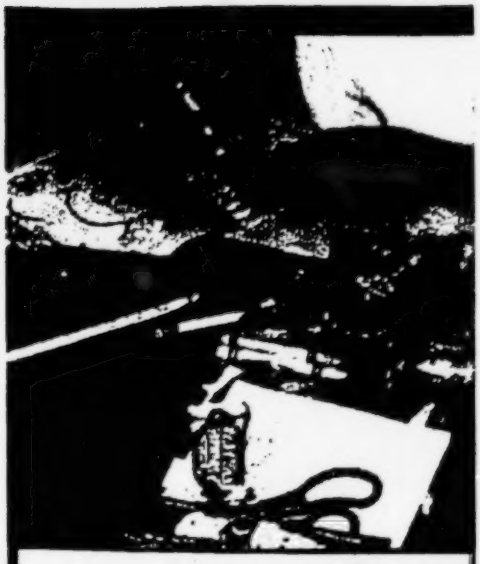
"Beauty": A Learning Expedition

For 12 weeks in 2002-03, NSA's fifth- and sixth-grade girls explored three guiding questions: What is beauty? How am I beautiful? What is beautiful in the world around me?

Resources included novels and music related to beauty; a trip to the Baltimore Museum of Art to see the "Feast, Famine, and the Female Form" exhibit; a presentation by a public health nurse, who talked about women's bodies, health, and beauty; and visits from older students from another school, who came to teach photography techniques.

The girls made papier mâché masks of their faces and wrote about what makes them beautiful. They analyzed messages in the media and popular culture about beauty, and they studied how ideas about beauty and fashion have evolved through history. The project culminated with a photography exhibit where students showcased the things they find beautiful in the world around them.

Teacher Emily Maunz notes that the flexibility she has to craft the curriculum around the needs and interests of students at any point in time is "a tremendous plus" that heightens students' investment (and her own) in the classroom.



Neighborhood Ties Promote Bonds Among Teachers, Parents, and School

Louise Sutherland grew up in Sandtown, a block from where she now directs the New Song Community Learning Center's preschool. She was working as a hair stylist in the 1990s when her sister, who worked for Sandtown Habitat, introduced her to New Song co-founder Allan Tibbels. While cutting Allan's hair, Louise mentioned that she had always wanted to teach preschool and was thinking about going back to school herself. That conversation led to an offer from Susan Tibbels for Louise to become a preschool assistant.

Over time, Louise was promoted to teacher and began to lead parent workshops. In 1999, she became the preschool's director. Since joining New Song, Louise has returned to school part-time, received an associate's degree, and has almost completed her bachelor's degree.

Louise is especially proud of the very strong relationships she has established with parents. She attributes those relationships in part to the fact that Sandtown is a small neighborhood. "Many people knew me growing up," she says. "They know that I am sincere, that they can talk with me."

such as a first-grader who sees his brother battling cancer, or another whose father is incarcerated—teachers are prepared to listen and function as steadfast sources of support and caring.

The importance of interpersonal relationships at New Song is reflected in the school pledge:

> *I pledge to show respect to myself, my family, my school, my neighborhood, and to all people everywhere; by caring, not hating; showing understanding, not anger; being thoughtful of others, not thinking of myself first; treating everyone as if it were me.*

It also is reflected in staff interactions with students. As one member of New Song's learning community has observed, "Words can destroy relationships . . . [so our teachers] do not believe in yelling, demeaning, or accusing students."[9] Teachers frequently remind students not to use derogatory names or say "shut up," and they encourage students at the weekly school-wide assembly to publicly praise or apologize to their peers.

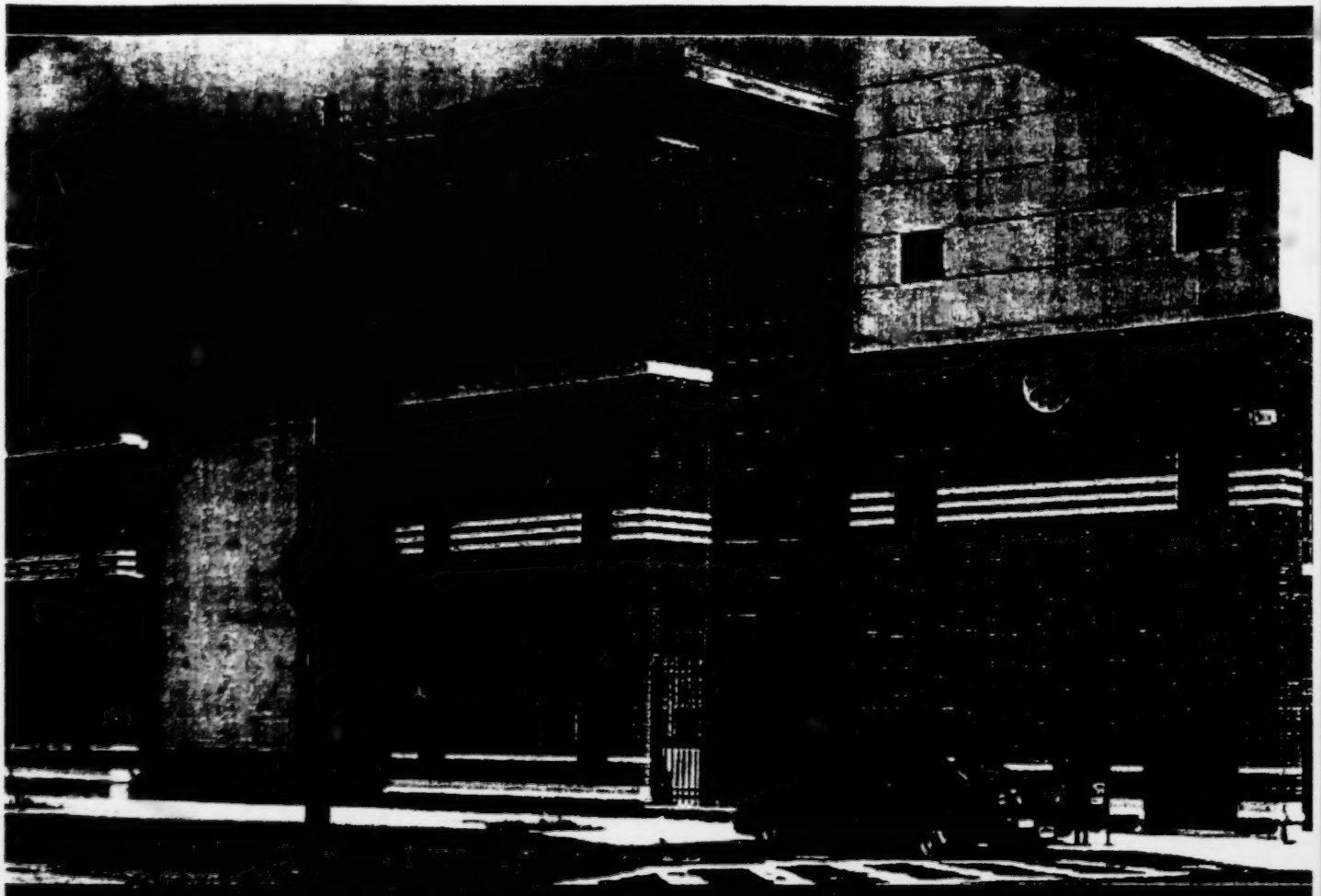
Strong support for—and among—teachers

New Song Academy's atmosphere of respect extends to teachers, who comment that one of the main reasons they work there, despite the pressures of teaching in a high-poverty community, is the support they receive from school administrators. New teachers are selected by parents, current teachers, and administrators on the basis of their skills and their ability to fit into and contribute to the school community. Once hired, teachers know that everyone at the Academy has high expectations for them but also is invested in their success. Administrators observe teachers in action and make suggestions for strengthening their work. At the end of each six-week session, teachers and administrators take a day to reflect on accomplishments and problems, make adjustments, and plan for the next session.

A commitment to hiring parents and community members

The practice of hiring residents as staff helps the Academy establish community ownership of the school and advance NSUM's community development mission. Often, a paid staff member begins working at the Academy as a volunteer. One example is Richard Thomas, a young man from Sandtown who walked in off the street, introduced himself to staff, and volunteered his services as a chess teacher. After a year of volunteer coaching, Richard formally joined the school staff as a teacher's aide. He assists in the classroom, monitors halls, and teaches chess. He now has decided to return to college and obtain a degree in education.

[9] Tibbels, S. (2001). *Op. cit.*



CHAPTER TWO

A History of New Song Academy and New Song Urban Ministries

Where does a school like New Song Academy come from? What history shaped the educational goals and structure described in Chapter One?

New Song Community Learning Center's education programs began in 1991, when Susan Tibbels, a Sandtown resident and co-founder of New Song Urban Ministries, created a cooperative, half-day preschool program for three- and four-year-olds and an afterschool program. Collectively, the programs served about 40 students with a two-year, $75,000 grant from Save the Children. There were no educational preschools or

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"Like a mustard seed, community development begins small. It involves gentle, non-cataclysmic, and genuine responses to human needs that, given space and nourishment, grow in depth and scope."

—Rev. Mark Gornik, NSUM co-founder
In *Urban Mission*, December 1994

afterschool programs in Sandtown at the time, and the neighborhood schools were unable to offer physical education, art, and music classes.

In 1994, Sandtown parents whose children had attended the Learning Center's afterschool program wanted a nurturing, neighborhood-based school as an alternative to the very large middle school that was zoned for Sandtown students. They approached Learning Center staff and together established New Song Academy as a private middle school for 11 students, using for a school building a converted crack house that was once on the verge of collapse.

The Academy gradually expanded to serve more students and grade levels as more parents embraced the school. In 1997, parents called for an expansion of New Song Academy to include elementary grades. In response, New Song Academy became a public school under the New Schools Initiative of the Baltimore City Public School System, a program that gives some schools charter-like flexibility (see box on page 3). By 2002–03, New Song Academy had 120 students enrolled from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade.

In spring 2001, New Song Urban Ministries built a $5 million center to house the Academy; provide space for job training, health services, and musical and arts performances; and accommodate community events such as weddings, workshops, and basketball tournaments. (New Song raised about $1.4 million from city and state sources, and the rest came from private and corporate foundations, individual donors, and congregations.) The fully-licensed preschool program also has its own building, renovated by Sandtown Habitat for Humanity. Today, children can enroll in preschool at the age of three, continue at the Academy through eighth grade, and then while in high school receive assistance from the Learning Center to enroll in college. The Learning Center's scholarship program provides support to Academy graduates who go on to private high schools.

But to really understand the story of New Song Academy, one must also know the history of New Song Urban Ministries. NSUM is a labor of love and faith—a label that is so often applied to community development initiatives that on the surface it seems trite. But in NSUM's case, the description is both literal and fundamental, and it is a powerful organizing force not only for New Song's passionate leaders but also for the children and community members who participate in its programs.

New Song Urban Ministries began in 1986, when Baltimore youth worker Allan Tibbels and his wife, Susan, decided to pursue their commitment to community change by living on the front lines of the battle against urban poverty. Although they had long believed in the Christian ideal of "loving our neighbors," the Tibbels say, their desire to translate that belief into action had grown increasingly compelling over time. So Allan, Susan, and their two young daughters relocated from a comfortable Baltimore suburb to one of the toughest neighborhoods in the city.

Rev. Mark Gornik, a Presbyterian minister, joined the Tibbels in their move. Gornik, also a Baltimore native, was a former Sunday school student of the

Tibbels. As he later explained, "[W]e believed it was vital that we turn from our complicity in a culture that is anti-black, anti-poor, and anti-urban and turn to the biblical obligations of justice and reconciliation."[6]

The three friends' goals were to provide opportunities for neighborhood residents to develop their strengths and to create a "bridge" that would bring physical and economic resources to the community. For the first two years, they focused simply on getting to know their neighbors. As whites in a community where virtually all other residents were African American, they had to earn their neighbors' trust and respect one step at a time. They volunteered at the local recreation center and attended community meetings. They listened, shared ideas, nurtured friendships, and tried to understand the community's needs "from the inside out."

In 1988, a core group of 15 to 20 people began to meet regularly in Gornik's living room for worship, forming New Song Community Church, an interracial congregation founded within the Presbyterian Church in America. (By 2002, the church had about 100 active members.) In 1989, the church members purchased a long-vacant building to house the church. They renovated it on a shoestring budget, using a combination of neighborhood sweat equity, pro bono professional assistance, and a grant from the Abell Foundation.[7] From that modest beginning grew New Song Urban Ministries, a community development enterprise with a remarkable range of programs and organizations, each of which emerged in response to articulated community needs and interests, and each of which engages people from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

NSUM'S MISSION

As a member of the Christian Community Development Association, NSUM emphasizes "the three Rs": relocation to the community of need, redistribution of resources, and reconciliation of the races. In the mid-1990s, co-founder Gornik described several additional principles that shape NSUM's philosophy and mission[8]:

- Holistic ministry is spiritual, social, and economic in nature.
- Renewal percolates up, not trickles down, and addresses underlying issues, not symptoms.
- [Effective] changes . . . are grafted onto existing social and family networks. Thus the bridges to change aren't programs but relationships.
- Successful development will build on the strengths of people and the community, not bypass them. Everyone has a vital and unique contribution to make. Therefore, broad-based leadership development is primary, not secondary.

[6] Perkins, J. (1995). *Op. cit.*
[7] Gornik, M. (2002). *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
[8] Gornik, M. (December 1994). "Between Resurrection and Reconciliation: The Story of New Song Community Church." In *Urban Mission*, pp. 52–60.

Personal Connections: A Powerful NSUM Resource

After a major New Song funder and his wife spent a day volunteering with Sandtown Habitat, he sent Allan Tibbels a letter and two checks. One was a $5,000 contribution to Sandtown Habitat. The other was a $1,000 check made out to the young man, a Habitat staff member, who headed the work crew that day. The letter described the young man as "a fabulous boss for the few hours I was able to join you" and said the gift was intended to "encourage him to keep his infectious enthusiasm and positive outlook that inspire others to do such good work."

Allan Tibbels notes that "forming relationships across class and racial lines and producing tangible results together brings joy and a sense of the possibility of justice to those who are rebuilding. Barriers are broken down as black and white, affluent and poor, urban and suburban work side by side in equal partnership, everyone bringing resources to the process."

- The sustaining motivation for confronting poverty is a concern for justice, not economic self-interest.
- True development will be mutually transformational, not one-sided. It begins and ends with a change in heart.

For New Song's leaders, "faith-based community development" means living out their faith rather than delivering a message to others. New Song is not aggressive in its religious stance; most residents are not part of New Song Community Church, and many attend other local churches. But participants and observers do point to faith as the unifying element that makes the whole enterprise work.

CORE COMPONENTS

By 2002, New Song Urban Ministries encompassed the following components in addition to the Community Learning Center.

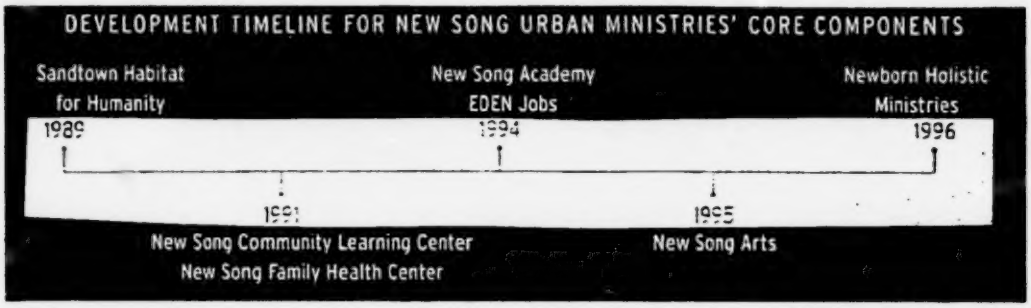
Sandtown Habitat for Humanity (established in 1989)

This work, part of the national Habitat for Humanity program, builds or renovates affordable homes for Sandtown residents. Each homeowner family contributes at least 330 hours of labor to the renovation and buys the house with a 20-year, interest-free mortgage. Their payments are reinvested in the development of more homes. Habitat's major partners are The Enterprise Foundation, which provides construction loans and grants and helps arrange interest-free financing; the Baltimore City Department of Housing and Community Development, which gives Habitat vacant houses to rehabilitate and provides general support; and the Baltimore Community Development Financing Corporation, which provides permanent financing.

Since its inception, Sandtown Habitat has completed 200 homes and had 56 additional units under construction at the end of 2002. The program employs 19 full-time staff, including 14 residents—some of whom receive training as assistant construction managers. Allan Tibbels serves as co-executive director with resident LaVerne Stokes. A full-time director of family support manages the homeowner selection process, helps families proceed through each stage of the construction and purchase process, and provides follow-up support. Sandtown Habitat also draws on thousands of volunteers annually from congregations, colleges, corporations, and other organizations.

New Song Family Health Center (1991)

The Family Health Center began as an all-volunteer free clinic, operating one night a week in the basement of New Song's main building (which, at the time, also housed the church, Sandtown



Habitat, the Learning Center, and a job placement program). Its initial goal was to make primary health care available to uninsured children and adults. Through 1995, operating part-time, the health center received about 1,000 patient visits annually. In 1996, the clinic moved to a newly renovated 3,000-square-foot facility and operated full-time in partnership with Baltimore's Mercy Medical Center. It received 6,000 patient visits annually and sponsored a variety of health promotion, education, and outreach programs. In 2002, however, as part of its plan to stop providing services through community-based clinics, Mercy ended its partnership with New Song Urban Ministries. The Family Health Center temporarily suspended health services pending completion of a new medical partnership.

EDEN Jobs (1994)

Through pre-employment job readiness training, job counseling, job search and placement assistance, and long-term career development services, EDEN Jobs aims to help at least 175 unemployed residents obtain job placements every year. It has a staff of 16, of whom 12 are neighborhood residents. EDEN Jobs also operates several initiatives, including the Men's Employment Network, an Individual Development Account savings program, and the EDEN/Self-Motivated Career Center (an Empowerment Zone program).

New Song Arts (1995)

New Song Arts seeks to develop and share community talent by offering neighborhood youth music instruction, voice lessons, and performance opportunities. It has five full-time employees, two of whom are residents. New Song's 40-member youth choir, Sandtown Children of Praise, has self-produced several recordings and recently signed a national recording deal. Every spring, the choir goes on tour; in 2002, students performed six concerts in North Carolina and Tennessee. A 22-member high school choir, Cross Culture, supplements its rehearsals and performances with summer camp, game nights, and other recreational activities.

Newborn Holistic Ministries (1996)

Elder Harris, a lifelong resident of Sandtown and pastor of a small storefront church, became involved with New Song through Sandtown Habitat for Humanity. Drawing on the New Song model, he established Newborn Holistic Ministries as a nonprofit arm of his church. Its purpose is "to provide services that will enable residents to meet their material, social, and spiritual needs." In 2000, Newborn opened Martha's Place, a 12-bed transitional residence for women recovering from drug and alcohol addiction. With a staff of six (four of whom are neighborhood residents), Martha's Place operates a structured six-month program that helps women reenter the community drug-free, find and retain jobs, and obtain permanent housing. Newborn Holistic Ministries has a covenant relationship with New Song Urban Ministries, and the two organizations work together on many neighborhood concerns.

GOVERNANCE AND RESOURCES

New Song Urban Ministries operates as an umbrella organization that unites the various components,

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each of which has its own corporate status and leadership board with at least 50 percent community representation (see organizational chart on page 4). Only one staff position is fully dedicated to NSUM; the rest of New Song's approximately 100 staff members all work for one of the component organizations. The NSUM Board includes directors from each component program and a small group of civic leaders from the greater Baltimore area.

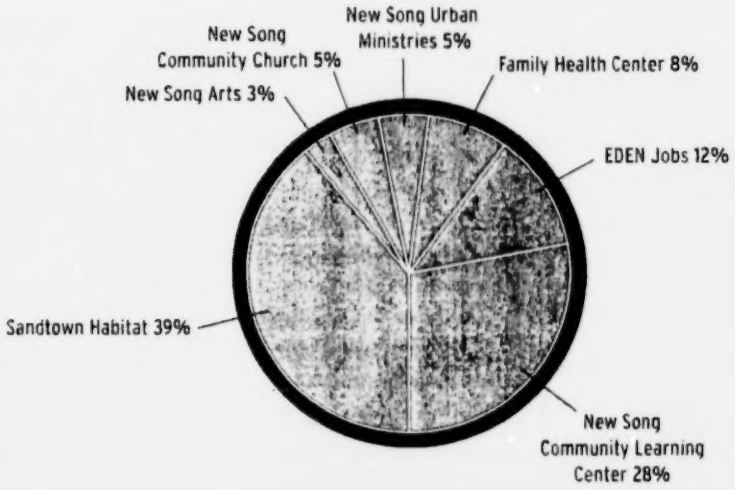
In 2002, the steady growth of NSUM programs necessitated a stronger organizational infrastructure. With financial and technical support from The Rouse Company and the Surdna Foundation, NSUM leaders began working to create financial systems, human resource policies, an operations manual, all-staff coordinating events, a monthly newsletter, and other vehicles for reinforcing a shared identity across programs and improving management.

Annual operating costs for all NSUM programs are about $5 million. In addition, NSUM's assets include six new or renovated buildings worth a total of approximately $10 million.

New Song Community Church is a congregation of the Presbyterian Church in America. This gives NSUM unique access to networks of contributors and individual donors outside the community. People who belong to the church networks or volunteer for various programs contribute skills and personal connections in addition to money—providing pro bono architectural or medical services or links to jobs, for example.

The personal investments that New Song Urban Ministries solicits are as important a resource as the financial contributions. Volunteers often are deeply affected by their time in Sandtown. They gain satisfaction from meaningful work, they are inspired by genuine human connections, and they feel profound outrage about the debilitating conditions of poverty. Some of these individuals turn their encounters with Sandtown into ongoing connections that produce benefits for years to come, reinforcing the value that New Song places on the power of personal connections to bring about change.

ALLOCATION OF FUNDS ACROSS NEW SONG URBAN MINISTRIES


New Song Urban Ministries 5%
New Song Community Church 5%
Family Health Center 8%
New Song Arts 3%
EDEN Jobs 12%
Sandtown Habitat 39%
New Song Community Learning Center 28%

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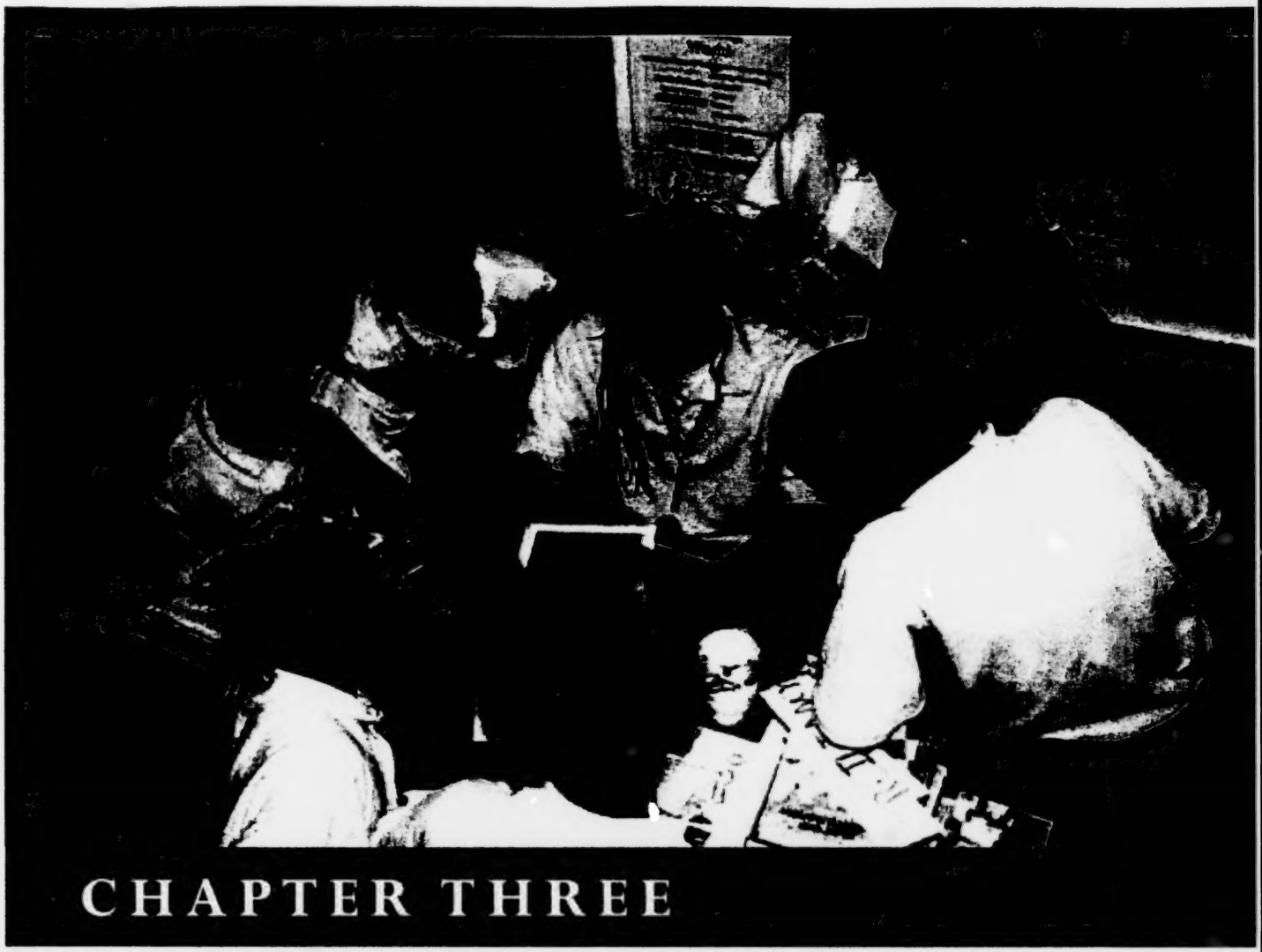

CHAPTER THREE

New Song Academy's Accomplishments and Themes

New Song Academy is less than 10 years old. Like most new schools, its leaders have spent much of that time building physical and organizational structure, fine-tuning curricula, and working out instructional strategies. It is early to expect dramatic results from those activities, but there are some signs of success. This chapter highlights those accomplishments and explores the underlying themes.

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Relationships Have Lasting Impact

William Scipio, who graduated from New Song Academy in 1998, was an eighth-grader when he met "Chick" Lord, the father of a teacher at the school. Lord was a caring and "well-mannered" man who became a surrogate father to William, the young man recalls. They spent time together almost every weekend—at baseball or football games, eating out, running errands, shopping, or just hanging out at Lord's house. The older man instilled in William a sense of discipline and a drive to achieve, along with a commitment to helping others in the community.

William credits Chick Lord with helping him succeed at NSA and move on to a new life at the Blue Ridge Boarding School in Virginia. At Blue Ridge, William encountered one-on-one learning opportunities and met students from around the world. That experience "gave me the chance to expand my horizon and better myself for the future," he later wrote. Without the relationships he developed with Lord and the rest of "the New Song family . . . I would have ended up just like my family: either in jail, dead, selling or using drugs. I would have ended up just roaming around on the streets trying to figure out where I need to go in life." Instead, William graduated from high school in 2002 and is now attending a Maryland university.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

There is anecdotal evidence that a "community culture around education" is growing in Sandtown, especially as New Song Academy's graduates internalize the value of education and use it to guide their own children's futures. For example:

- Many young parents are now competing to do the best job of preparing their kids for preschool. One young woman has bought books to help her teach her three-year-old daughter how to write her name. A young man who had an especially challenging childhood now buys his son books and educational toys for Christmas and attends parent meetings at the preschool program.
- A smart but disruptive girl who attended NSA received extensive outreach from staff but still dropped out and had two children by the time she was 18. Recently, she called a school administrator and offered to volunteer as she works to obtain a General Equivalency Diploma.
- When one parent withdrew her child from NSA, angry over a change in school policy, she enrolled the child in a private school. That would not have happened if the mother hadn't seen other NSA graduates attend private school, say school staff. "She had expanded her view of the possibilities for her child, even if she was mad at the school," they note.
- Students' parents, friends, and relatives are focusing on their own education as they see doors opening for their educated children. Sandtown residents who serve as AmeriCorps members receive $5,000 education stipends at the end of their service. Fourteen of these graduates have volunteered at the Learning Center; several who have become staff are working to obtain education degrees, and those achievements have helped them become role models for the success that education can bring.
- Increasingly, Sandtown adults who receive matching funds for Individual Development Accounts use the savings not for tangible goods, such as cars, but for college educations.

New Song has a city-wide reputation for success, too. Private funders praise the school's scope and its quest for excellence in everything—an emphasis on high standards that other community development efforts have been unable to approach or sustain. They also value the depth of the personal commitment made by people involved in the effort.

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New Song Academy's positive outcomes are important, but they remain highly qualified, partial, and often non-standardized successes. When a functionally illiterate student who attends NSA learned basic reading skills, for example, it was a huge personal success. But the student still couldn't pass the standardized test of reading ability, so his remarkable achievement didn't "count" according to standards used by the public school system.

With scholarship support from New Song, the majority of the Academy's graduates go on to private high schools (mostly local parochial schools or boarding schools out of state), where they continue to receive personalized attention and support. Some of these students later become homesick and return to Baltimore, where they enroll in public high schools. Their parents typically work hard to get them back into private school or to advocate for them within the public system, because New Song graduates who go to large public high schools are vulnerable to falling between the cracks and dropping out.

New Song Academy is just beginning to see its first graduates finish high school and go on to college.

THEMES THAT GUIDE NSUM AND NEW SONG ACADEMY

What makes New Song Academy work so well for Sandtown children and families? The answer lies in a few themes that shape New Song Urban Ministries' approach to education and community building.

1. Relationships—both within and outside the neighborhood—are the centerpiece of a powerful strategy for transforming people and the community.

NSUM participants view the ability to build strong and caring relationships as the "make-or-break" factor in the mission's success. By listening respectfully to neighbors and friends, and including them in efforts to set the agenda, school leaders and members of the community develop shared ownership of the problems they want to address and a mutual sense of responsibility for taking action.

The message here is, "You can't go it alone." That philosophy extends to New Song's strategic partnerships with powerful supporters outside the neighborhood, which have brought impressive human and financial resources into the school and community. NSA's alliance with the public school system is one example; others include ties to the city housing and community development agency and long-term relationships with private and corporate foundations, some of which have supported the school for nearly a decade.

2. A broad definition of education encompasses much more than academic learning.

New Song's mission of fostering residents' leadership ability causes the school to value social, civic, and

"It will take several generations to reestablish the value of education in our community. You can't create a culture shift in a six-month program. It comes about through long-term relationships and one small success building on another. As hope and expectations are raised, values and practices change. One day, every child in Sandtown will anticipate going to college."

—Susan Tibbels
Director, Community Learning Center

personal growth as highly as academic achievement. Thus children are connected to the Academy in many ways beyond the traditional school experience. Music, sports, afterschool partnership activities, mentoring, mental health counseling, and other school-linked programs help students "find their gifts" and "get exposed to so much," as fourth-grade teacher Christy Cosby-Lewis says. Educational success is not defined merely by test scores, although they are an important indicator of success.

3. A comprehensive, holistic approach extends the school's impact into the community.
New Song Urban Ministries is a web of programs, relationships, supports, systems, and opportunities for Sandtown residents. The services and opportunities provided by New Song Urban Ministries are designed to overlap, and the links between the Academy and other threads of that web create many of the conditions needed for success. Of the 150 children who attend or have graduated from New Song Academy, for example, almost half live in homes built and purchased through Sandtown Habitat. Many have parents who use NSUM's job training and placement ministry to find work and visit the clinic for health services. Those supports give the children the stability they need at home to succeed in school.

Families have many entry points to the school beyond enrolling their children, and the school has a pervasive role in family life. A father who becomes a homeowner through Sandtown Habitat wants to pass his sense of empowerment on to his children, and he becomes an active partner of the school in motivating and monitoring students' progress. Another parent discovers that she has a talent for administrative work, and finds a part-time position at the school that leads to full employment and promotions.

These parents don't just drop their kids off at school, says teacher Cosby-Lewis. They are personally invested in the school's success, and when they see school staff in the neighborhood they view them as friends, neighbors, and colleagues. In that sense, the holistic approach produces a family feeling that reinforces and extends the Academy's impact.

4. Learning opportunities for adults are as important as educational outcomes for children.
New Song Academy's mission is not just to provide a good school, program, or other "product" but also to strengthen community ownership, capacity for change, and leadership. The commitment to resident leadership drives NSA to invest very intentionally in grooming volunteer staff for leadership roles. Volunteering enables potential leaders to meet peers, try out new roles, and work toward paid positions. But it also requires senior staff to provide ongoing professional development, often through one-on-one mentoring. Explains one administrator, "[Leadership] may not be present in the traditional way, it may not be tapped into, but you learn to see it in a dedicated and reliable volunteer, someone who takes the initiative and has a positive attitude and believes in our vision and mission. You begin to see his or her gifts and talents."

In this context, New Song's emphasis is first on people and second on roles and responsibilities. "I don't take the position, 'This is the job description, who can fill it?'" Susan Tibbels says. "Instead, I try to say, 'What do you bring to the organization around which a job could be defined and through which you could develop?'"

Jane Johnson, a New Song parent and employee, is a good example of this philosophy. Johnson was hired as a teacher's aide even though she didn't have any background in education because school administrators saw assets in her volunteer work that could be built upon. Then Johnson began organizing everyone; she started a newsletter, set up files, and began keeping track of payments. Her innate love of details and her ability to structure and organize the work fit perfectly with what NSA needed. As one school member noted, "A school that is committed to broader community development must be very observant of peoples' strengths and exquisitely attuned to identifying opportunities to help grow those strengths at a constructive pace."

"People who are real to the kids and parents are the best teachers of new leaders. The community trusts them and can be inspired by them—the 'If they can do it, so can I' phenomenon."

—Jane Johnson
Resident, parent, and NSA Assistant Director

5. Creative staffing makes the school flexible and inclusive.
For front-line staff, New Song leaders often seek people with attributes other than formal certification. Because many children lack strong male role models at home, for instance, Tibbels makes a special effort to recruit male staff. Three of New Song Academy's 10 classroom teachers are men. Similarly, of the total number of paid staff for the Learning Center, 77 percent are African American and 49 percent are Sandtown residents.

Many of the school's parents and staff say that being a neighborhood resident is also an important attribute for New Song Academy teachers. Such staff know students and families intimately and are invested in the neighborhood for the long haul, and they serve as role models for what a child can achieve with an education.

Employing residents as staff and other types of school leaders can also present challenges, however. When one community resident begins to assume a leadership role, other residents who are not making comparable advances may feel threatened. Some residents refuse to accept their peers' authority, expect a fellow resident to work harder and longer than another employee might, or unfairly blame an uncredentialed teacher for their child's academic failures.

Men, in particular, struggle to succeed in Sandtown because many of their leadership opportunities have been undermined by lack of education and economic opportunity. "Peoples' worlds need to be expanded so their perspective is broader and strength and success are less threatening," notes an observer. Adds Jane Johnson, who has experienced some of the tension of being in a leadership role, "I humble myself and don't take it personally . . . . When I've had a hard day, I remember that I'm working for the kids."

School Involvement Helps Parents Find and Hone Their Capacities

Jane Johnson became a parent volunteer in 1991, when one of her four children entered the New Song preschool. She was caring for the father of her youngest child, who had been shot and paralyzed from the neck down. Volunteering for one hour, twice a week, gave Jane a respite from those responsibilities and a window into the larger community.

At first, Jane was simply "overwhelmed with joy by the fact that [Learning Center staff] were loving my child so much." Gradually, she increased her volunteer commitment to two hours a day. By 1994, when New Song Academy opened, the father of Jane's child had moved to a nursing home, and Jane was free to take a full-time position as teacher's assistant. She was paid for half of her time and volunteered the rest.

As Jane became more knowledgeable about the Academy's daily life, she was promoted to fully paid jobs, first as administrative assistant and later as the school's assistant director—a job she held in 2002 while also working on a college degree in nonprofit management.

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NSA Measures Success on Individual Terms

For the high number of New Song Academy students who have learning problems, success can't be measured accurately using traditional test scores. John (not his real name), for example, is a fourth-grader who has attended the Academy for three years. During that time, his scores have improved significantly each year. John still learns slowly but has become very involved in his own education, has good behavior, and tries hard. Despite these gains, John still scores only at the 11th percentile of all children who take the standardized test nationally. If he can stay in school, however, he will become functionally literate, allowing him to be a productive worker and an engaged citizen leader. By New Song's values, that would certainly constitute success.

6. Tension exists between NSA's definition of success and expectations held by the public system in which the school operates.

There are three ways for schools and school systems to measure students' progress and achievement. They can test students' performance against absolute standards for what children need to know and be able to do at a specific age or stage of development. They can measure the value added by education—the personal academic, social, and civic growth experienced by a child measured only against his or her starting point. Or they can use norm-referenced tests to rank a child or group of children compared to national norms.

Each method of assessment reveals something useful about a child, but none gives the full story. For schools like New Song Academy, which tend to emphasize value-added assessment, the tension comes when their school systems rely primarily on one of the other forms of assessment.*

NSA has earned a reputation as a model inner-city school based on such strong practices as an extended school day and year, caring teachers, use of two proven curricula, partnerships, and mentoring programs. District and state officials who visit Sandtown are impressed by the school's high attendance, polite and engaged students, and active learning environment. But when it is time to judge the school's success, they look primarily at test scores—and neither they nor New Song staff are satisfied with students' performance on the standardized tests. Nonetheless, in 2002 New Song students' scores on the Maryland School Performance Assessment Program improved in almost all categories of the test at every grade level. Further, almost all sixth-graders passed the fall administration of the Maryland Functional Reading Test, a marked improvement from previous years (when many sixth-graders entered the Academy from other schools, unable to read). The students who had attended NSA the longest (those who entered in preschool and are now in sixth grade) had the best scores of any class, suggesting that the school's overall scores will improve as more children experience the full 11 years of education that the preschool and Academy now offer.

These improvements are even more noteworthy given that many New Song students have special needs that would qualify them for special education services in an ordinary school. As in most urban communities, many Sandtown children face the dangers of

*To further understand the relationships among these three methods for measuring success, New Song Academy is participating in an Expeditionary Learning/Outward Bound pilot project that pays for a consultant to examine data on individual students' academic growth over time. Early findings are expected in mid-2003.

fetal alcohol syndrome or prenatal exposure to crack cocaine. An especially troubling threat in Sandtown, one of three lead hot-spots in Baltimore, is brain damage caused by exposure to the toxic lead paint prevalent in substandard housing.

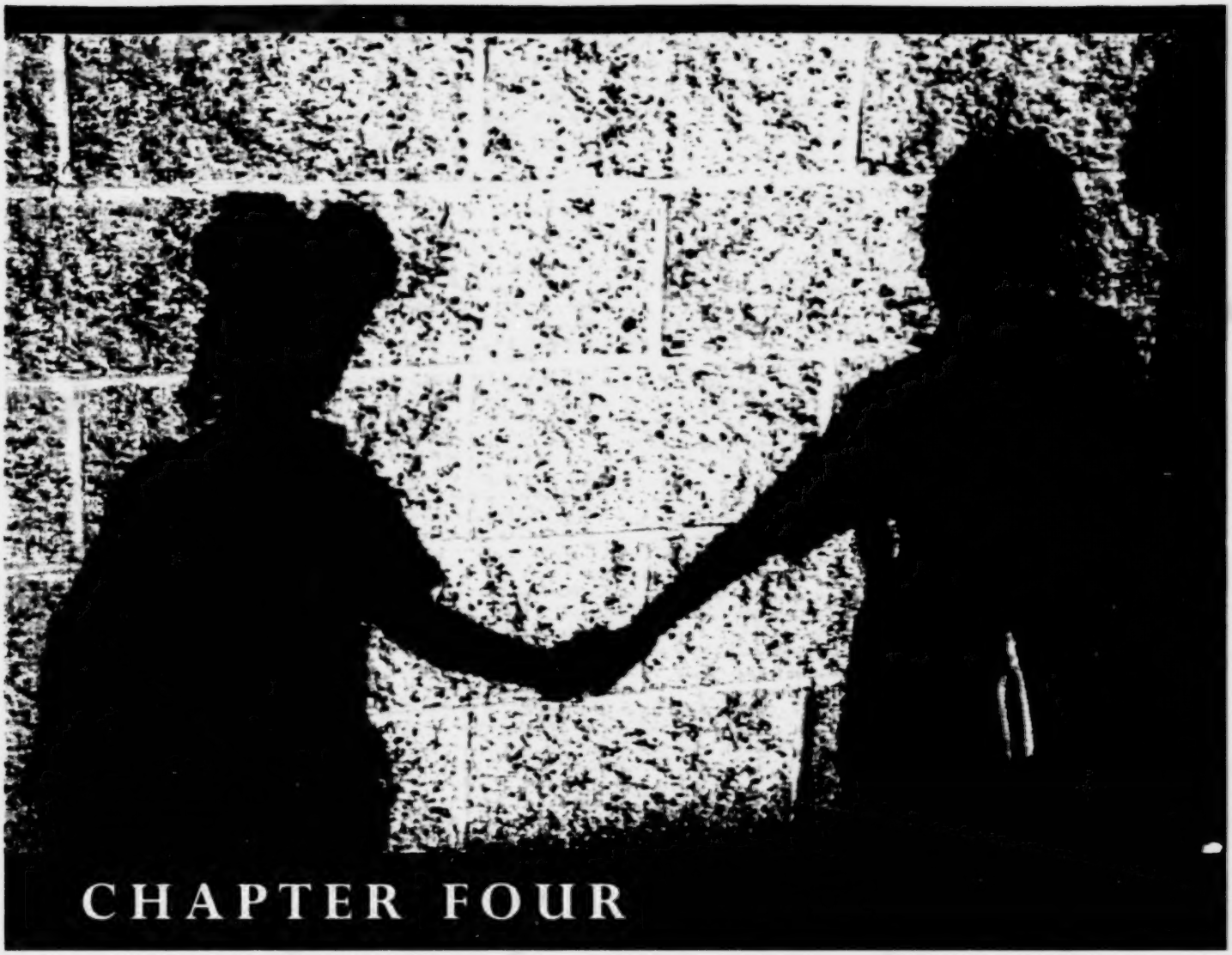
NSA staff deliberately avoid labeling these students, however, claiming that students who are pulled out of class to work with a district specialist would receive less individualized support, not more. The Academy's low student-teacher ratio and well-developed referral and support system to address students' academic and mental health concerns, they say, reduce the school's need to enroll students in the public school system's special education program.

Indeed, a member of the public school system's special education department notes that "children at New Song Academy who would most likely be enrolled in special education at other schools demonstrate such [academic] progress that it appears they can be successful" receiving special education services other than those provided by the district.

Laura Weeldryer, coordinator of the New Schools Initiative for the school district, acknowledges the dilemma that NSA faces as a school of choice. New Song doesn't "cream" applicants to accept only those who are likely to achieve measurable academic success. Yet it tends to attract a high number of students who aren't doing well in the regular schools, either because they are extra smart (and therefore ostracized by their peers), extra slow, or prone to behavior problems. New Song therefore has a higher percentage than other schools of children with extreme needs and problems, Weeldryer observes.

In most public schools, identifying children as "special ed" students gains them access to special services, including a social worker and extra academic support, Weeldryer says. But the label also brings a huge amount of paperwork and meetings associated with each identified child; the special services are not always of high quality; and it becomes harder to place the child in a private school when he or she graduates.

Until recently, New Song's focus on supporting emerging leaders overshadowed the importance of changing the public school system's practices for measuring success. But new state and federal standards present little room for the school to measure progress from the students' starting point. And as New Song's community development achievements become more widely known, the school has drawn closer scrutiny. Leaders are worried that the school's commitment to non-standardized measures of academic growth could jeopardize its public funding in the future. The potential for conflict between the school and the school system will remain a concern as long as the two entities have divergent values.



CHAPTER FOUR

Lessons From New Song Urban Ministries and New Song Academy

As an enterprise that is deeply embedded in the larger NSUM mission, New Song Academy has contributed to and drawn on NSUM's lessons about how to implement a vision for community education and revitalization. Those lessons, outlined below, underscore the importance of having a strong mission to guide this very complex agenda for strengthening children, families, and the community in which they live.

1. Program components that develop organically, in response to community demand, help to ensure that results are authentic.

A core NSUM principle is to start slow and build gradually. That approach is one of the key characteristics of successful community building; it stands in contrast to "help" that comes with an imposed agenda (thus violating community autonomy) or acts of benevolence (which can create dependence and undermine residents' self-respect).[10]

New Song Urban Ministries' development embodies this theme. As Mark Gornik points out, the founders had no plans, programs, or timelines when they arrived in Sandtown. Rather, they recognized that members of the community should determine the focus, pace, and nature of the redevelopment process. Together, they developed a grand vision for what Sandtown could become. But they moved toward that vision in small, incremental steps. "We would make the road by traveling it together," Gornik writes.[11]

For NSUM, the process of doing the work became as important as what the work produced. Building a Habitat house, for example, creates an important asset for one family. But it also can build bonds among neighbors and volunteers working on the house, creating a sense of caring and shared responsibility. It can train people in construction skills. And it can generate pride and hope in the community. Those skills and social capital become available when residents need to address a range of community concerns.

Similarly, New Song Academy evolved incrementally. NSUM leaders didn't set out to create a school; Susan Tibbels was called to action by parents who were concerned that their children were receiving neither the respect nor the education they needed in Sandtown's other schools. Having worked together to shape NSUM's vision for youth as community leaders, these parents saw that effective education called for a new approach, and they were committed to working with the school to make it happen. Building a school in this way draws on the talents and perspectives of everyone involved and generates local champions who are deeply invested in success. Similar pressure to expand NSA into a high school is now emerging within the community.

2. Development cannot move ahead of the neighborhood's readiness for action.

Both the Academy and NSUM overall have learned to launch new programs only when there are leaders willing and able to take them on. This lesson reinforces New Song's deep commitment to cultivating leadership and shapes the way work gets done. Although NSUM will seek technical expertise from non-residents when necessary, about two-thirds of its staff (including senior managers) are long-time neighborhood residents. Residents have many options for how they want to participate, what contributions they want to make, and which skills they want to pursue. Within each program area, including the school, there are openings for volunteers of almost any age, opportunities to expand a first role into a bigger one, and positive ways for every person to contribute. Through this process, residents like Mary Williams, who started as a teacher's aide and is now the Academy's parent liaison, assume increasing levels of responsibility and move into management positions.

Every NSUM staff person is expected to identify and nurture talent. That process takes time, and it can slow the pace of progress, but the expectation also keeps participants focused on NSUM's mission. Their goal is not just to produce a school program or a new house—although those are indeed valuable outcomes—but to make it possible for Sandtown residents to gain the knowledge, skills, and experience they need to create a thriving community. That mission requires New Song to set a pace based on community readiness rather than need.

3. Entrepreneurial leaders bring creativity to the work and expand its horizons, but they also create a need for management structures or processes.

People who are willing to assume leadership roles in endeavors like NSUM or New Song Academy often are passionate, independent entrepreneurs who can create something out of nothing and inspire others

[10] Ellerman, D. (2001). "Helping People Help Themselves: Toward a Theory of Autonomy-Compatible Help." Available at www.ellerman.org/dev-theory.
[11] Gornik, M. (2002). *Op. cit.*

to come along. The challenge for NSUM is to make sure that the overall mission guides the work without cramping the style and energy of individual leaders. NSA teachers, EDEN job counselors, Habitat construction managers, and New Song Arts music directors all need to share NSUM's mission and core values while also operating within their own programs.

The many partnerships that bring external resources and opportunities to New Song Academy, for instance, have evolved because of Susan Tibbels' entrepreneurial instincts combined with flexibility and a willingness to share power and decision-making with partners. As director of the Community Learning Center, Susan reaches out to many organizations—encouraging the Visionary Art Museum to create a mosaic on the school's outside walls, for example—and responds to overtures from others, such as an offer by the University of Maryland to provide two full scholarships for community members who want to attend college via the Internet. "We don't need glory and recognition, we need to give our partners the freedom they need to do what they do best," Tibbels emphasizes.

Over time, NSUM has discovered the importance of aligning each leader's efforts with the organization's core values, ensuring quality control, and avoiding competition for funding among programs. Those lessons led NSUM in 2001 to begin developing financial and human resource systems that will reinforce a shared identity across programs and improve management.

4. The effort to rebuild communities and empower their residents is a long-term endeavor that calls for perseverance and patience.

Living and working in Sandtown means constantly examining tensions between the pain of daily struggle and the joy of rebuilding, injustice and goodness, isolation and connectedness, and "lament and celebration"; as Gornik writes, "The two faces of suffering and possibility constantly shadow one another in Sandtown."[12] People who live in chronically low-income communities sometimes expect suffering and injustice and come to accept rather than fight it.

Operating in this context requires tremendous commitment and an understanding that significant change takes decades, not years. The ability to think about the work in such a long-term context is part of what distinguishes NSUM from many time-limited community initiatives. The faith shared by so many people associated with New Song supports this type of enduring commitment.

5. New Song's focus on very local revitalization requires vigilant conservation of time and resources.

Leaders of NSUM and New Song Academy are constantly asked to advise other communities, sit on other organizations' boards, and join partnerships and policy-reform efforts outside Sandtown. Because their local priorities are so clear and compelling, they are reluctant to risk being diverted by other concerns. Some people misinterpret their stance as insular or as failing to appreciate the role of policy in shaping neighborhood conditions. But NSUM leaders say it is really about being steadfast in their focus and driven by a mission.

This lesson affects all levels of decision making. In early 2002, for example, New Song Academy's board members realized that 20 of 110 students no longer lived in Sandtown, and therefore had moved beyond the scope of NSUM's community-building focus. After a long debate, they concluded that the school would have to enforce a residency requirement if it really intended to foster local leadership and serve as a community-based school. The decision helped to keep the Academy aligned with NSUM's overarching mission, but it angered some parents and will likely hurt the education of some students who had to transfer to other schools. Several families even moved back to Sandtown to regain eligibility for the school.

[12] Gornik, M. (2002) *Op. cit.*

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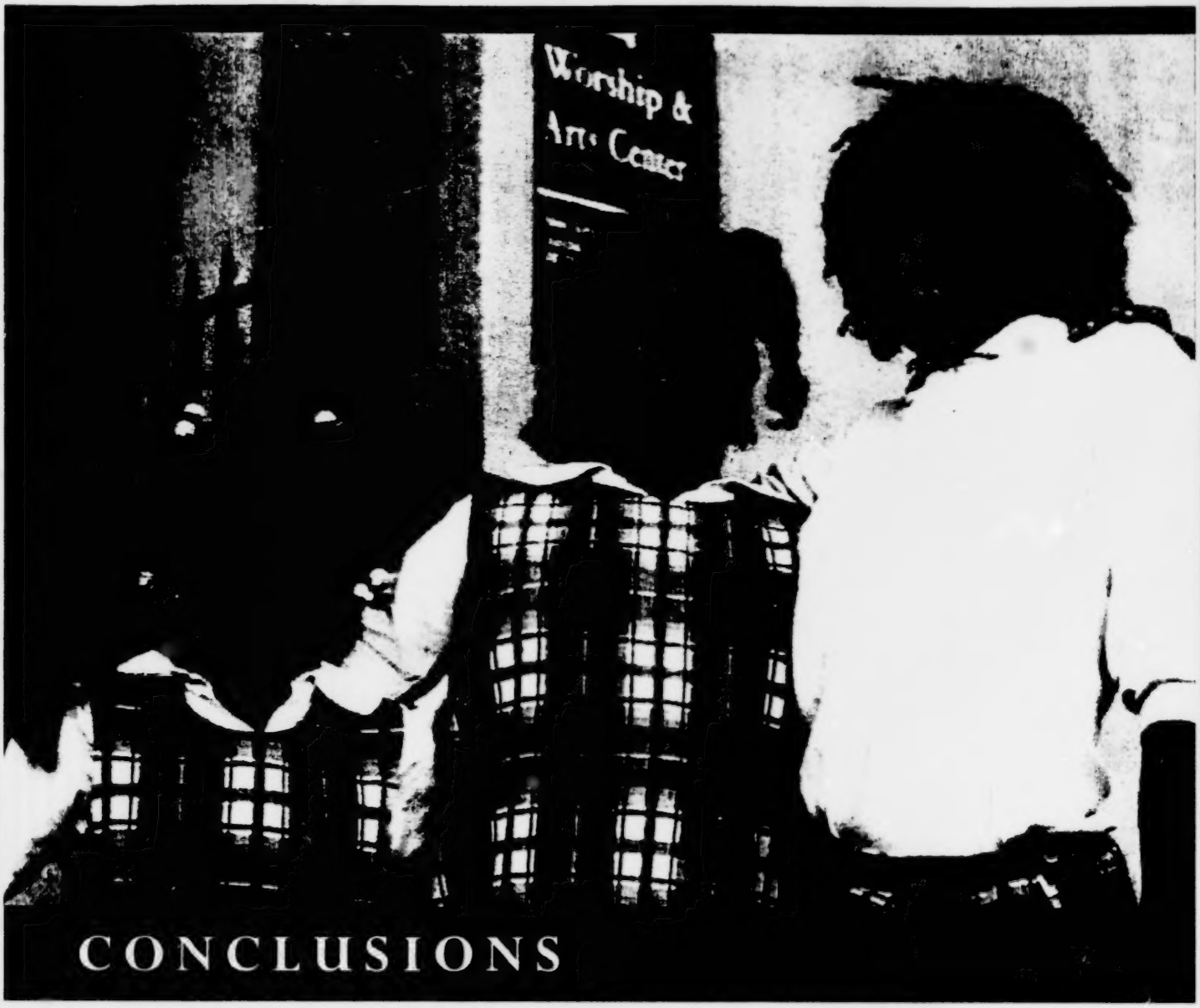

CONCLUSIONS

In a relatively short amount of time, New Song Academy and its parent organization have established a set of ideas, actions, and relationships that is beginning to demonstrate *impact* (actual changes in a condition of well-being experienced by children, adults, families, and the community directly served by programs); *influence* (the ability to shape ideas, policies, regulations, systems, practices, and public opinion); and *leverage* (the use of funding or influence to generate additional support from public and private sources). The challenge now is to continue building the school and other NSUM components while remaining true to the New Song mission—despite the heightened expectations and demands of partners within and outside the community.

NEW SONG'S IMPACT

NSUM is far ahead of most community development efforts in applying a holistic approach to a small geographic area over an extended period of time, and New Song Academy benefits from that experience. After less than a decade of operations, NSA can claim many accomplishments:

- The high school graduation rate for students who completed middle school at New Song Academy has increased every year and exceeds the rate for the city overall (70 percent in 2002, compared with 59 percent citywide), although the actual number of students who are old enough to have graduated (19) is still small, given New Song's short history.
- The average daily attendance rate for students (98 percent) is among the highest in the city, and the teacher attendance rate is similarly high. Very few students miss 20 or more school days per year (less than 2 percent, compared with 35 percent citywide).
- Of the 19 New Song graduates who are old enough to have graduated from high school, five are college students or graduates. At least 10 of these have jobs.

Anecdotal evidence of the school's impact is also encouraging:

- Children who failed in other schools are discovering the joys of learning, graduating from school, and raising their own children within a culture of education.
- Children and adults in the community have a more positive view of themselves, their aspirations, and their potential for success.
- The programs have proven that residents of economically depressed neighborhoods can produce high-quality education, decent housing, excellent health care, and effective job services.
- An estimated 25 percent of residents of the target area have been directly engaged in one or more aspects of the New Song enterprise, and just about everyone in the neighborhood knows about New Song.

Despite these important impacts, New Song's efforts are diluted by the violence, unemployment, depression, and structural obstacles to success that continue to plague the neighborhood. There are still rats in the streets, drug deals in the alleys, and trash in abandoned lots. The police department flies helicopters over Sandtown at night. And negative influences still have a hold on children; on weekends, observes one teacher, "They run with their friends who are not in the school. It's a challenge to instill in them the values that will keep them safe and on a good path even in the face of big problems."

Deeper impacts will take time to produce. According to Allan Tibbels, it takes "maybe 10 years to get to know a community; 20 years to produce some tangible results; 30 years for real transformation. You need to test [ideas] out and demonstrate [them]."

Empowering Residents as Leaders

LaVerne Stokes, Co-Executive Director of Sandtown Habitat for Humanity and President of the Learning Center Board, grew up in Sandtown and raised four girls there as a single parent (two of her own and two of her deceased sister's). LaVerne is now married to a childhood friend who is a ruling elder at New Song Community Church. She talks about why it is important for Sandtown residents to help shape and lead New Song:

"This is such a small neighborhood. Everyone knows who is struggling, who is having a hard time. When they see community residents in leadership positions, they begin to feel that it might be possible for them, and they begin to question how they can become part of something successful. And, over time, they begin to see that they can have a powerful voice.

"Allan and Susan believe in that voice; they know how to listen. When we were planning [a major housing redevelopment] we asked people to comment on our plans. They made lots of changes. And when they moved into the new homes[,] they called the city to say they wanted a particular parking configuration, which the city agreed to. So they were beginning to understand that as tax-paying homeowners they could find some power in numbers.

"That is a huge thing for people who have been treated with so little respect by society, by the police, by social services, by the housing authority. These are the folks who are sending their kids to New Song Academy, who now have the expectation that their kids will go to college. Some are going back to school themselves. That's what change is all about."

The school needs more time to build in young residents the leadership skills that offer a direct path—albeit one of several—to neighborhood revitalization. Meanwhile, there are 200 vacant homes that still need renovation, some economic development and investment strategies have yet to be implemented, and connections to the regional economy need to be established.

Few other comprehensive community initiatives have the scope, local ownership, strong mission, integrated components, and successful track record that New Song Urban Ministries already has. But long-term success is harder to define, because it hinges on residents taking over the work. After all, New Song Academy isn't just trying to be a great school, it's trying to be a great engine for community change. And as Allan Tibbels points out, residents may well have their own ways of defining success. New Song may just be a job for them, not necessarily a life mission.

INFLUENCE

Many community residents have experienced deep and lasting personal transformations by participating in New Song Academy and other NSUM programs and, often, by finding influential roles to play. Many residents also have assumed leadership positions in the broader community.

New Song Academy's experiences have caused some changes in the way Baltimore's school district interacts with all schools, particularly around funding. In 1998, for example, the Annie E. Casey Foundation hired a consultant to analyze NSA's funding and help the school show the school system that the public funding formula was not being applied correctly. The school system now contributes nearly twice as much money per pupil as it did in the past. The increased financial support for NSA and other nontraditional schools is a step toward creating the critical mass of flexible, community-based schools needed to achieve better outcomes for all children in the city. Nonetheless, New Song Academy is just one small school, and it may be unrealistic to expect it to reshape the policies and practices of schools citywide.

New Song Academy has been tapped to serve as a model for the Expeditionary Learning design, a sign of the school's potential for national influence. National and international observers who visit the school leave impressed by what can be accomplished through adherence to a long-term, focused mission. New Song leaders are ambivalent about whether they want New Song to become a national model, however; they believe in their approach but don't want to be distracted from their commitment to Sandtown. Moreover, NSUM's reliance on people being willing to relocate to

tough communities presents an obstacle to widespread replication, both for the school and for other components. Partly for that reason, observers are following the development of a second New Song effort in New York City's Harlem community, started in 1997 by Rev. Mark Gornik and two like-minded colleagues. The principles of both missions are similar: Start small, maintain very high standards even if it means reaching fewer people, go deep, build relationships, let activities grow in response to articulated needs, find and develop residents' skills, and do things with people rather than for them.

As Susan Tibbels observes, New Song is now at a crossroad. "If we have the financial support, we can expand our horizons. Without it, we may have to lower our expectation of total neighborhood transformation." She continues:

> *We have an opportunity to see whether this approach to community development is a national model. How far can it go? What will it take to really transform the community into a healthy, well-functioning environment for families? . . . . This is uncharted territory.*

LEVERAGE

NSUM's early successes have leveraged ongoing support. The Academy's culture, practices, and success with individual students continue to attract financial support from the school district and private funders. In Fiscal Year 2002, foundations contributed more than $425,800 to New Song's educational programs. And the tangible success of Sandtown Habitat caused the city in 2001 to turn 134 additional homes over to Sandtown Habitat for renovation, representing a $1.1 million investment. The city also provided all funding for 10 housing units to be rebuilt and donated an additional $10,000 per unit.

New Song Academy's funding sources have expanded and diversified. The number of foundations that support New Song Academy has grown consistently, from three in 1994 to 11 in 2002, and public funding has been added. Although the Learning Center is careful not to request continuous support from any contributor, most donors do provide long-term support, which gives the school a chance to build a firm base.

Many funders make contributions to the school that extend beyond financial support, in the form of volunteers, computers and technical support, job shadowing opportunities for students, and pro bono professional services. The Rouse Company and its foundation, for example, have invested financially in New Song's success, and their support has leveraged considerable in-kind support from Rouse employees who share the company's commitment to education and children. More than 50 employees have been actively involved with the school as mentors, teachers, and leaders of extracurricular activities, notes Jerry Smalley, the company's Chief Operating Officer and treasurer of NSA's board. "We've had project managers and architects helping manage the school's construction process and foundation staff helping in the fund development area. Our IT people have equipped and advised the school on its information technology; our merchandizing people helped set up the model store at the school."

Sometimes, too, the leveraging process goes full circle and the in-kind contributions made by volunteers spawn new financial investments. For instance, when one of the Rouse employees who volunteered weekly in the school's economics education and investment program (see page 8) noticed that many students' white uniform shirts were frayed or yellowing, the Rouse Foundation purchased two new shirts for each student. That contribution was probably very significant in the eyes of the students, but it might not have happened without the volunteer's involvement.

New Song's presence has also caused a ripple effect of investment in the community. Two local churches have raised money for renovation and building projects in long-vacant units or lots. Local landlords have spruced up the exteriors of substandard rental units—repainting facades, painting doors bright colors, and cleaning up yards. Local businesses have also upgraded facades and exteriors. The public schools have experienced pressures for improved performance and better connections to parents.

There also is anecdotal evidence of residents deciding to remain in the neighborhood rather than move to the suburbs when they have the opportunity to do so.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

New Song Academy's immediate challenges are clear. Now that the school has a state-of-the-art facility, there is pressure to expand the afterschool program, parent education efforts, and other family- and community-oriented services. This effort started small, through an evening aerobics class for neighborhood women. After working out the logistical issues of providing and paying for extra building security, New Song is ready to expand programming, and in fall 2002 EDEN Jobs began using the school building for evening job fairs and training.

Academy leaders are strengthening operations by focusing on student discipline, parent engagement, and board development. Following discussions in 2002 with students, parents, and teachers, the school formulated a new discipline policy. At the suggestion of parents, the policy emphasizes the importance of modeling behavior at home that is consistent with the school's standards, and it outlines various levels and consequences of behavior. School staff have also been redeployed to positions in the hallways when individual children need time out from their classrooms for disciplinary reasons.

Susan Tibbels reports that the new policy, which specifies expulsion from school in extreme cases, is providing better support to teachers and better supervision to students. It has begun to help clarify responsibilities, promote perceptions of fairness, and ensure that disciplinary measures are applied consistently. The new approach also allows students who need help to get it more quickly. "More schoolwork is getting done because the policy has found the right balance between the public school system's zero tolerance policy and NSA's former policy of total grace. Parents were key to shaping a policy that works," Tibbels says.

The collaborative process used to develop the policy exemplifies the constant challenge of sharing power among New Song stakeholders, and school leaders hope to make their partnership with parents even stronger in the future. All parents attend the school's orientation session, but only half are actively involved in school activities. Two parents who are on the school's paid staff are trying to develop strategies for increasing that proportion, which exceeds parent participation in many other schools but is not high enough to meet NSA's standards.

The school's rapid growth has also necessitated some attention to building organizational infrastructure. In 2002, The Rouse Company—a long-time funder of New Song—paid for management and finance consultant Kathleen Basham to assess NSA's organizational needs and recommend changes. It soon became clear that the school needed more than recommendations, so Rouse continued Basham's contract to address the following management activities:

- **Financial systems**—School leaders created an operating budget, profit and loss statements, cash flow estimates, and other financial planning tools. A bookkeeper was hired to organize financial records and determine the school's per-pupil cost. Staff and board members now have a stable operating budget that they can use to set priorities and make strategic plans.
- **Human resources**—NSA's personnel files were overhauled to bring them into compliance with regulations, an employee manual was written, and a filing system was developed.
- **Organizational structure**—The school developed an organizational chart and a manual that explains how to use the school's equipment, outlines a preventive maintenance plan, and provides other operating guidance.

The long-term challenges are more complicated. In particular, the Academy must find a way to expand programming and improve quality while also preserving the culture of the school. As Susan Tibbels notes:

> *It is critical that we do things slowly enough to ensure quality. We need to do a careful cultiva-*

tion of the people and groups who will come to use the building. For example, we have a culture in the building that says it's not O.K. to say 'shut up.' How can we maintain this culture if the building is increasingly used by new groups? If people begin to perceive that our programs are not excellent and that we are not in control of the building, our reputation will be damaged in important ways that we cannot afford.

In addition, the school must respond to changes in the neighborhood and face performance pressure from the school system.

Sustainability is also a concern. The tide of change in the community has positive momentum that is not easily derailed, but it will still require an extraordinary amount of continuous effort to secure funding for NSUM and New Song Academy, demonstrate outcomes, and reach a critical mass of residents. One supporter notes that Baltimore's most powerful funders—who often disagree about investment priorities—are unusually united in their support for New Song Academy and NSUM. He attributes their confidence to NSUM's comprehensive vision, high-quality programs, leadership, and ability to leverage outside support.

Those attributes have positioned NSUM's programs, including New Song Academy, well to compete for program resources. The relatively modest core funding that NSUM needs to connect these programs and maximize their impact as a whole, however—between $200,000 and $300,00 per year—is difficult to raise, and it is crucial to the whole enterprise. Several observers suggest that NSUM should have reliable core support for the next decade in order to test what is possible through this distinctive approach to local change. "This is one of the field's best chances to really . . . learn about the possibilities and limitations of one important and well-executed community change model rather than start something new yet again," one observer says. "Having invested this much with such relative promise, it would be a shame to not see it through."

Sustainability also depends on NSUM's ability to achieve its goal of strengthening local leaders who can take over the ongoing effort. When asked about this aspect, Gornik says:

No one will replace Susan and Allan Tibbels. To that degree, the approach depends on them . . . . But they can grow into new roles, and others can take on new roles, and the whole [enterprise] will look different. And that is as it should be—a constant dynamic of new opportunities and new interactions focused on a shared goal.

New Song Urban Ministries will continue to facilitate those changes, with the Academy as a crucial part of that work. Ultimately, however, New Song's success rests in the hands, minds, and hearts of Sandtown's residents.

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PHOTO DESCRIPTIONS

Cover: Outside the entrance of New Song Academy; p. ii: New Song Community Learning Center; p. 2: Street in Sandtown; p. 3: New Song Academy student; p. 5: New Song Academy students; p. 6: New Song Academy students reading; p. 7: New Song Academy students; p. 9: New Song Academy student; p. 10: New Song Academy student working on an art project; p. 11: New Song Community Learning Center; p. 13: Nina Anderson, Executive Director of EDEN Jobs, front center, with some EDEN staff members; p. 14: Construction at Habitat for Humanity site; p. 17: Joseph Edwards, teacher at New Song Academy, with students; p. 18: New Song Academy student; p. 22: Students examining globe; p. 23: New Song Academy students working on an art project; p. 24: Students outside of New Song Academy; p. 27: Street in Sandtown with Habitat for Humanity homes; p. 28: New Song Academy students outside of New Song Worship and Arts Center; p. 29: LaVerne Stokes and Allan Tibbels, Co-Executive Directors of Sandtown Habitat for Humanity; p. 33: Susan Tibbels, Executive Director of New Song Community Learning Center; p. 34: New Song Community Church and Learning Center.

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